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Cleanup at plant surpasses state fund

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At \$37 million, the cost of cleaning up the defunct Cedar Chemical plant in Helena-West Helena is four times more than the Arkansas Department of Environmental Quality has in its Remedial Action Trust Fund for rehabilitating such sites.

"As of the end of February, the Remedial Action Trust Fund had about \$8.6 million, and some of that is already committed to other projects," said Ryan Benefield, the department's deputy director. "We have 13 sites in different phases of remediation."

For this reason, the state has asked the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to add the plant to the Superfund list, which would mean federal money would be used for the cleanup and would allow the EPA to pursue restitution from any parties deemed responsible for groundwater and soil contamination left there. The announcement of the Superfund-list proposal was made a week ago.

"The size of this project just exceeded our ability," Benefield said. "Getting the site on the national priorities list was our only option at this point."

While there's no timeline for how long it will take to get the site fully rehabilitated, Benefield said residents have nothing to fear, the department just wants to get the site cleaned up.

"The groundwater and human health concerns have been addressed through an agreement with the company that's currently leasing the site," Benefield said. "We do not feel there's a risk to the neighbors. Our concern is the ultimate cleanup. It's safe for industrial workers to be on the site. They have to follow specific health and safety plans."

While the plant was shuttered in 2002, Harcros Chemicals Inc. took over stewardship of the site in 2010. The company razed several of the buildings there. A subsidiary, Quapaw Products, operates on part of the 48-acre property.

Three companies have been identified as "partially responsible parties" for the environmental damage done at the site: Helena Chemical Co., Ansul Inc. (known at the time of ownership as The Ansul Co.), and ExxonMobil Chemical Co., Benefield said.

Helena Chemical opened the facility in 1970 and made Propanil herbicide. In 1971, the plant was sold to Eagle River Chemical, a subsidiary of Ansul, which manufactured Dinoseb, a herbicide that was banned in the 1980s.

In 1976, ExxonMobil Chemical Co. was operating the plant. Cedar Chemical took over the facility in 1986 and ran it until the company's bankruptcy in 2002.

While none of the companies admit liability, Benefield said, they have spent about \$3 million since 2002 investigating and controlling the site with department oversight. For example, they've paid for mowing and security, as well as the study needed to create the remediation plan.

The journey toward cleanup will begin after a 60-day public comment period, which is required before the EPA can add the site to the national priorities list, said Dave Bary, a regional Dallas-based spokesman for the agency.

Information on submitting public comment may be found at www.epa.gov/superfund/sites/npl/pubcom.htm.

Bary had no timeline for when the site might be added to the Superfund list.

"Once added, it allows the agency to determine the nature and extent of contamination at a Superfund site," he

said. "Once that information is known, the next step is a feasibility study where we take a look at all of the options available to address the contamination."

Stacy Kika, a Washington, D.C.-based spokesman, reports that the EPA's 2012 appropriation for the Superfund was \$1.2 billion.

Since 1983, 1,661 sites have been listed as Superfund sites. Of those, 359 have been cleaned up, leaving 1,302 still on the list, Bary said. Cedar Chemical is among 62 sites awaiting final agency action to be added to the list, he said.